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Der Präsident des Europäischen Patentamts;
Im Auftrag

For the President of the European Patent Office

Le Président de l'Office européen des brevets
p.o.

R C van Dijk

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Bezeichnung der Erfindung/Title of the invention/Titre de l'invention:
(Falls die Bezeichnung der Erfindung nicht angegeben ist, siehe Beschreibung.
If no title is shown please refer to the description.
Si aucun titre n'est indiqué se référer à la description.)

Refrigerator with internal compartment divisible into independent temperature zones

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The present invention relates to a refrigerator in accordance with the introduction to the main claim. Herein, the term "refrigerator" means either an upright refrigerator in which the temperature is normally greater than -2°C , or a freezer in which the temperature is maintained constantly below 0°C .

As is well known, in a refrigerator (static or no-frost) it is very important to achieve a correct temperature in each of its preservation or freezing compartments in order to obtain optimum preservation of foods stored in it. In particular, it is well known that different foods storable in the compartment for preservation require different preservation temperatures, as for example the case of meat and fish compared with vegetables or dairy products.

It is known from European application 2014881 of the Applicant, which forms a pre-characterising part of the main claim of the present document, a shelf to be used in the refrigeration compartment for dividing such compartment in two or more zones having different temperatures. Such shelf is provided with an electronic circuit for setting the temperature in the portion of the compartment above the shelf, without the need of using any cable or plug-socket connection since the transmission of data, as the power transmission to the electronic circuit of the shelf, is carried out by inductors placed on the shelf and in the wall of the refrigerator respectively.

To have an inductor or an antenna embedded in the insulated wall of a refrigerator has some drawbacks since the production cycle of the refrigerator has to be modified. Moreover in case of failure of one or more embedded inductors or related electronic circuits, it is impossible to replace the defective component.

An object of the present invention is to provide a refrigerator in which zones at mutually independent temperatures can be obtained and in which the inductors or antennas associated with the refrigerator compartments and cooperating with corresponding inductors of the electronic circuit of the shelves can be easily installed and replaced in case of failure thereof.

Another object is to provide a refrigerator of the above type in which the shelves can provide a feedback to the user as far as the set and actual conditions in the refrigeration compartment or portion thereof are concerned.

These and further objects which will be apparent to the expert of the art are attained by a refrigerator in accordance with the accompanying claims.

The present invention will be more apparent from the accompanying drawings, which are provided by way of non-limiting example and in which:

Figure 1 is an exploded and schematic perspective view of a refrigerator according to the invention;

Figure 2 is a schematic front perspective view of a shelf used in the refrigerator according to the invention;

Figure 3 is a block diagram showing how the electronic circuit of the shelf works; and

Figure 4 is an exploded perspective view of a component of the refrigerator according to the invention.

With reference to figure 1, an upright refrigerator R comprises an internal compartment 2 having a rear wall 5. Usual supports 6 are present on the lateral walls, to support shelves 10 formed in accordance with a patent application already filed in the name of the same Applicant.

Each shelf 10 comprises means to enable the internal temperature of the compartment 2 (or a temperature range corresponding to a determined food category) to be set and to be measured. These means cooperate with control means of the refrigerator for controlling the operation of this latter on the basis of the temperature or humidity setting selected by the user.

The setting means comprise a user interface 12 positioned on a front edge of the shelf 10. These means for setting the internal temperature or other working parameters of the compartment 2 are an electrical and/or electronic circuit suitably inserted into the shelf 10, for example an electrical circuit of passive type defined by an RLC resonant circuit and comprising an inductor positioned in correspondence with a rear edge of the shelf a plurality of capacitors of various capacitances. Each capacitor is connected on one side to an electrical line connected to one end of the inductor, and on the other side to a changeover switch arranged to connect each capacitor to a second electrical line, connected to an electrical branch connected to the other end of the inductor.

With reference to figure 2, the removable food support element or shelf 10 includes the user interface 12 on a front edge thereof. The user interface 12

presents buttons 12a for setting physical characteristics, like temperature or humidity, in the refrigerator compartment, and preferably in the portion of such compartment above the shelf. The user interface 12 has also a display 12b for showing the temperature (or humidity) set by the user or the temperature actually present in the compartment.

The display 12b can also give indications about food contained in the sub-volume (smell, weight, gas emission), and such indication can be provided by the shelf to the control circuit of the refrigerator as well. The input device of the user interface 12, instead of buttons 12a, can include switches, electromagnetic sensors, reed switches activated by magnets on the shelf.

As an example a slider with a small magnet can be moved on the front side of the shelves 10, closing or opening some reed switches. The information obtained from reed switches is then used to set the temperature of the sub-volume above the removable shelf. In another example some capacitive touch sensors placed on the shelf user interface 12 are used in order to detect customer touch. Status of the sensor is continuously checked, and detection of a touch is then used to set the temperature of the sub-volume above the removable shelf.

The display 12b of the shelf can give a feedback to the user about data relative to actual physical characteristics of the sub-volume (temperature, humidity, temperature gap with a set temperature) or to characteristics of the food placed in the sub-volume. In order to provide the above feedback each shelf 10 can be provided with one or more specific sensor. Feedback is provided in a optical way (using a light, display, LED) or in an acustical way. Information content is associated to a color or color variation, to a numerical or alphanumeric indication, to an icon indication, to a particular sound or sound combination.

In the following we will refer to each electrical or magnetic device used for coupling the inductor of the shelf 10 to the refrigerator circuit as "antenna".

The information is delivered to the refrigerator by means of an electromagnetical signal, generated from an analog circuit or from a digital device being part of the circuit of the shelf 10.

The signal contain data in numerical form, or data are associated to a signal peculiarity, like frequency, phase or amplitude. After generation, the signal is then

modulated with a modulation scheme, amplified and transferred to the antenna section, where an electromagnetic wave is generated (Figure 3).

An information coming from the refrigerator control circuit can be received by the same antenna section, and then demodulated and transferred to an analog or digital circuit. The retrieved data are elaborated and the feedback elements are then controlled in the most appropriate form.

The power for electronic parts on the shelves 10 is obtained from a low frequency signal generated in the refrigerator. This signal is filtered, charging some energy storing elements like a capacitor, and a continuous like voltage is obtained to supply circuitry. As an alternative solution batteries or accumulators can be used to provide power at the shelf electronic circuits.

With reference to figures 1 and 4, on the refrigerator side several antennas 14 are placed in order to receive data from a shelf 10 and transmit data to it. Each antenna 14 is part of a resonant circuit and it is realized with one or more inductors 14a, placed in series or in parallel.

Each of these inductor couples with the antenna of the respective shelf only when the shelf 10 is placed in the position closer to the inductor 14a (the shelf have some fixed positions).

The data transmitted from the shelf 10 are then digitalized and sent to a control circuit of the refrigerator. Each of said antenna 14 is also used to transmit the carrier signal to the shelf's circuits and to send data via a carrier superimposed signal. For an easy mounting and assembling, a package 16 for antennas 14 is realized as described in figure 4.

A plastic flat support 3 is realized with some protrusions P, on which coils 14a are inserted. Coils 14a are then connected to a local electronic circuit 18 which generates the carrier signal and demodulates the signal received from the shelf 10, giving a digital signal as output. The signals from all the electronic circuits 18 are then collected through a connector 20 connected to the control system of the refrigerator. A second plastic part 16b covers the coils 14a, therefore allowing a complete package 8 of the antenna system. The complete package 16 is then assembled to a rear surface 22a of a removable wall or panel 22 to be mounted inside the cavity of the refrigerator R (figure 1). The wall or panel 22 can be of the

same polymeric material of the refrigerator liner, so that the user sees it as the back wall of the cavity.

In an alternative implementation only coils 14a are packaged (no local electronical circuit 18 is provided), and the terminals are connected with a connector to the control system of the refrigerator.

The package 16 is mechanically fixed to the back surface 22a of the removable panel 22 of the refrigerator R as described in Figure 1, by means of plastic clips, using an adhesive layer or with screw. The panel 22 is then fixed in front of the refrigerator cavity back wall 5. In an alternative solution (not shown in the drawings), the box-like package 16 can be replaced by an adhesive strip having the coils 14a fixed therein.

The technical solution according to the invention is particularly useful in a refrigerator where a volume is defined between the back wall 5 of the cavity and the removable wall 22, such volume being used for placing an evaporator of the refrigeration circuit. Such kind of refrigerator was described in a previous patent application of the same applicant. This means that it is not necessary to have another added component to be inserted in the cavity 2, since it can be exploited an already existing component used for thermodynamic purposes.

According to such solution, apertures 23 are provided in the removable wall or panel 22, some of these apertures 23 being provided with fans for assuring an exchange of air between the compartment 2 and the volume in which the evaporator is placed.

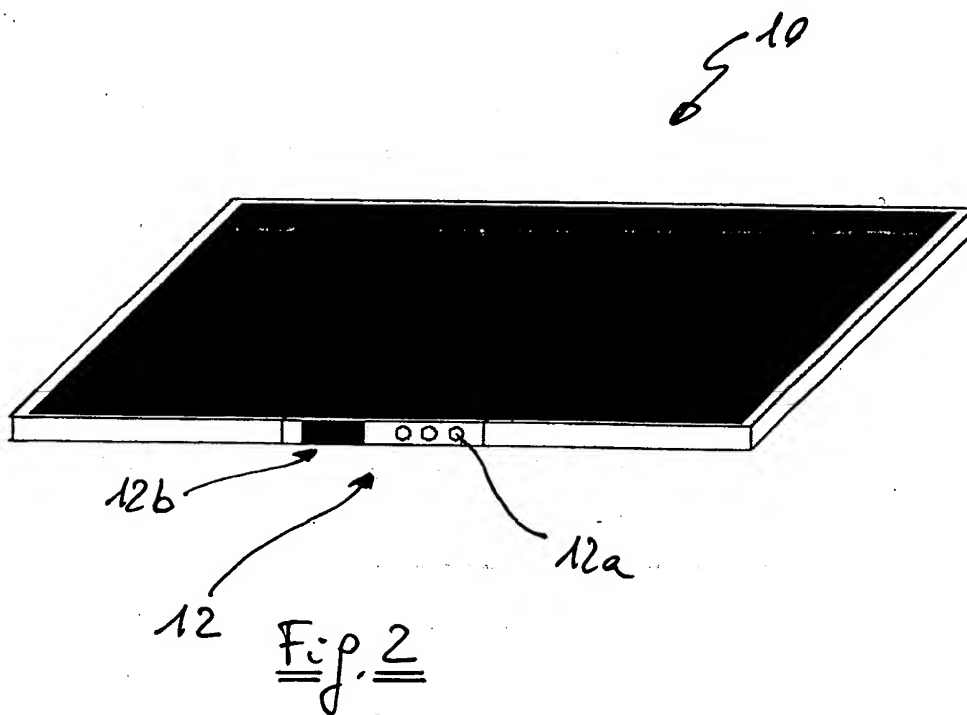
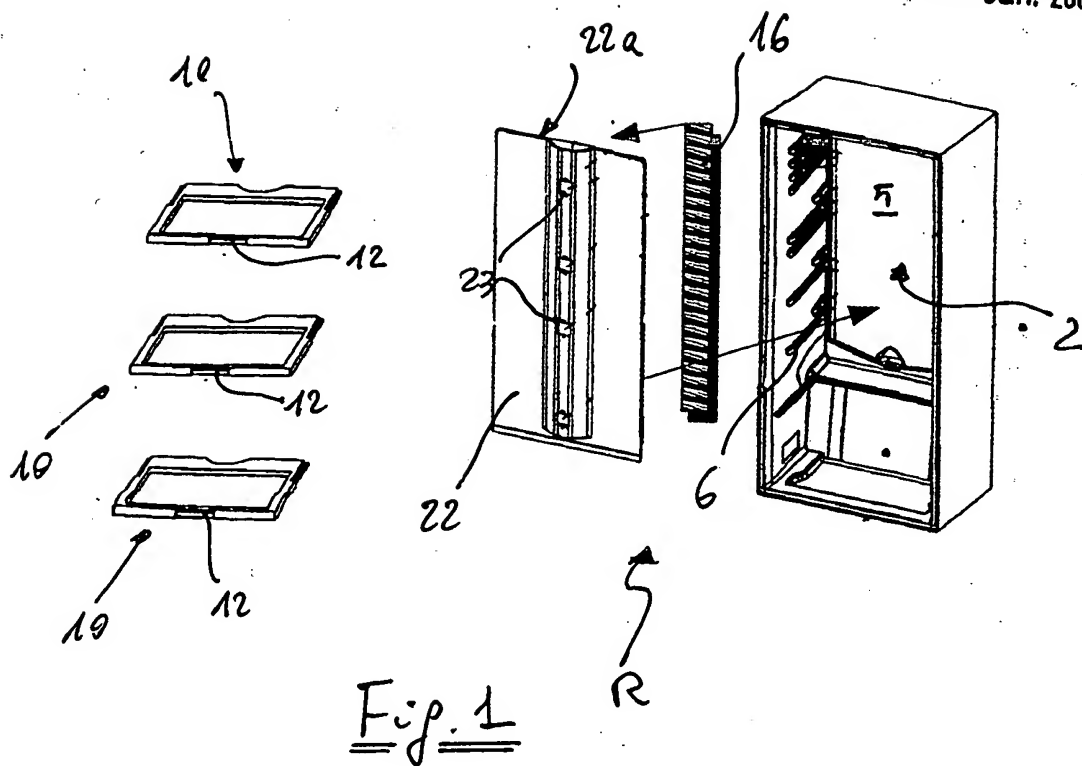
Of course the technical solution according to the invention can be used also for traditional refrigerators; in this case the removable wall 22 will be installed closer to the back wall of the cavity. Moreover, the position of the removable panel 22 can be different, for instance it can be placed on a sidewall of cavity 2.

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CLAIMS

1. Refrigerator (R) having a removable food support element (10), for example a shelf, drawer or the like, to be positioned in a refrigerator compartment (2), such element having setting means (12a) enabling the working conditions of the refrigerator compartment or portion thereof to be set and the information on the set conditions to be transferred to control means of the refrigerator, characterised in that it comprises a substantially vertical wall (22) or the like to be inserted in the refrigeration compartment (2), such wall (22) supporting inductor means (14, 14a) for receiving and/or transmitting data to said setting means.
2. Refrigerator according to claim 1, characterised in that said wall (22) is removable and faces the rear wall (5) of the refrigeration compartment (2).
3. Refrigerator according to claim 2, characterised in that said induction means comprise at least one coil (14a) supported on a rear surface (22a) of the wall (22) facing the rear wall (5) of the refrigerator compartment (2).
4. Refrigerator according to claim 3, characterised in that said induction means comprise a plurality of coils (14a) contained in a package (16) to be fixed to the rear surface (22a) of the wall (22) so that each coil (14a) corresponds substantially to a related removable food support element (10).
5. Refrigerator according to claim 4, characterized in that the package (16) comprises at least some of the electronic components (18) associated to the inductor means.
6. Refrigerator according to any of the preceding claims, characterised in that the removable food support element (10) comprises display and/or acoustic means (12b) in order to provide the user with a feedback on the conditions set in the refrigerator compartment (2) or portion thereof.
7. Refrigerator according to claim 6, characterised in that the removable food support element (10) comprises sensor means in order to provide the user and/or the control circuit of the refrigerator (R) with a feedback on the actual conditions in the refrigerator compartment (2) or portions thereof.

8. Refrigerator according to any of the preceding claims, characterised in that the setting means are adapted to set temperature and humidity.
9. Refrigerator according to claim 7, characterised in that the sensor means are adapted to provide a signal indicative of characteristics of food placed in the refrigerator compartment or portion thereof, including gas emission and weight.
10. Refrigerator according to any of the preceding claims, characterised in that in the volume defined between the panel (22) and the rear wall (5) of the refrigerator compartment (2) an evaporator is placed, apertures (23) being provided in the wall (22) for allowing air flow.



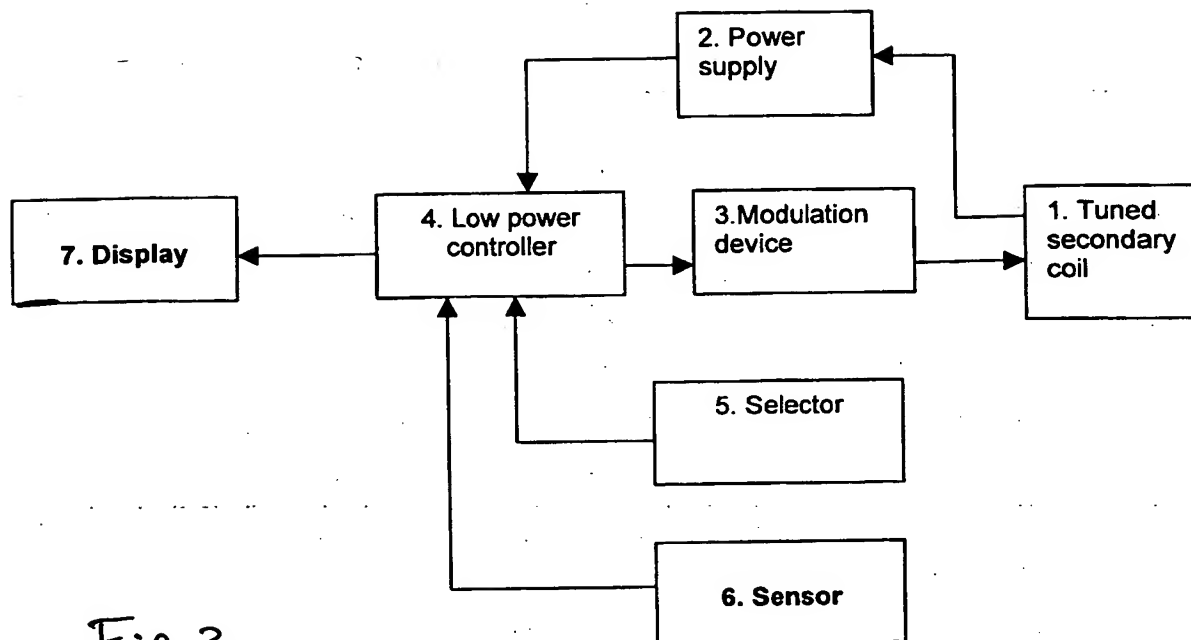


Fig. 3

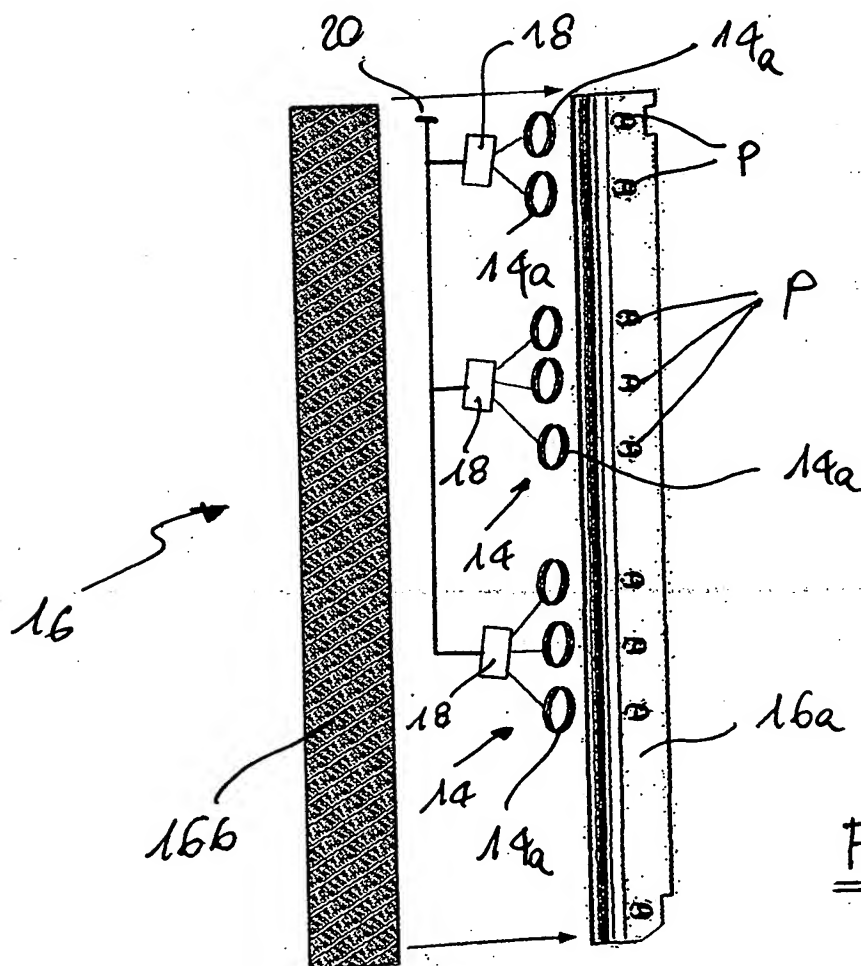


Fig. 4

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Title: "Refrigerator with internal compartment divisible into independent temperature zones"

ABSTRACT

A refrigerator has a removable shelf with setting means enabling the working conditions of the refrigerator compartment or portion thereof to be set by the user, the information on the set conditions being transferred to control means of the refrigerator. The refrigerator comprises a vertical wall (22) to be inserted in the refrigeration compartment, such wall supporting inductor means for receiving and/or transmitting data to said setting means.

(figure 1)

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